COMMENTARY / CULTURE

Confronting Colonialism

The complexities of addressing the past while decolonising museums

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On 7 June, Black Lives Matter protesters toppled the statue of Edward Colston, a seventeenth-century officer of the slave-trading Royal African Company, in Bristol, England. Racial polarisation in the US sparked debates around the British history of colonialism and slavery, and a demand for confronting unpalatable aspects of colonialism has gained momentum. HARRY PUGSLEY/GETTY IMAGES

As the Black Lives Matter movement reignited in the United States after the brutal police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, protests spread across the world, with public ire often targeting statues and busts of individuals who were involved in slave trade, imperial war crimes and racist conduct. Racial polarisation in the US sparked debates around the British history of colonialism and slavery, and a demand for confronting unpalatable aspects of colonialism has gained momentum. As statues fell—such as that of Edward Colston in the English city of Bristol, a seventeenth-century officer of the slave-trading Royal African Company—the task of finding them a new home began. In November, the mayor of Bristol announced that Colston's statue would be placed in a museum alongside placards from the Black Lives Matter protest that toppled the statute, by "early next year."

Two months earlier, William Dalrymple, an author of several books on the history of British colonialism in India, suggested that the United Kingdom should place its statues of imperial heroes in a museum of British colonialism. He proposed that the British government, in order to confront the sins of its past, should build a museum of colonialism with these expelled statues. Dalrymple suggested that the museum could be modelled after the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a museum dedicated to narrating the story of a marginalised ethnic and racial group in the US.

Dalrymple was speaking at the Jaipur Literature Festival London. He admitted to a cultural amnesia of colonial violence in the UK. History in British schools gives students the impression that "the British empire was always about liberating slaves and always about anti-racism," he said. In fact, for many years, British colonialism in the UK has been viewed as a largely peaceful undertaking with hugely beneficial outcomes for the colonies such as railways, English education, and dissemination of democratic and liberal values. In 2004, the historian Niall Ferguson declared in a provocative book on the Empire, "The world we know today is in large measure the product of Britain's age of Empire." He added, "Without the British Empire, there would be no Calcutta; no Bombay; no Madras."

It is only in the last decade that voices challenging such blinkered assumptions of pre-colonial societies—portraying them as static, primitive and incapable of engaging in modern practices without British intervention—have come to occupy a larger space in public discourse. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests this year, anti-racism protestors demanded (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-statues-removed-down-colston-rhodes-baden-powell-racism-a9560736.html) that statues of Robert Clive in Shrewsbury, Cecil Rhodes from an Oxford college, Oliver Cromwell in Westminster and the former British prime minister Winston Churchill's statue in London's Parliament Square be taken down. Activists have also called for (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/08/calls-mount-for-black-history-to-be-taught-to-all-uk-school-pupils) the compulsory teaching of Black history in schools, and there is mounting pressure on museums to decolonise their collections.

Given the years of refusal to confront its uncomfortable colonial past, the notion of a museum of British colonialism offers the possibility of the country finally facing the shame of its colonialism. Yet, a museum of British colonialism requires careful consideration of its form, structure and process to act as a catalyst of social and political debate, and to challenge the promotion and sustenance of white cultural hegemony. The idea also raises other concerns about the existing British museums; their role in decolonising histories and their engagement with the thorny question of restitution. The question is no longer what Britain's colonies would have been without the Empire, but what Britain would have been without the exploitation of its colonies, and how to acknowledge and address this colonial past in its modern-day legacy. These uncomfortable memories of colonialism reside not only in museums born of the Empire but also in museums in the colony, and both need to confront this agonising legacy.

The UK has a long way to go in terms of acknowledging its violent colonial history and a museum of colonialism could be a promising start. Unlike former colonised nations, where the dreadful horrors of colonial rule form a central lesson in school history, British school pedagogy has thus far offered little by means of a critical examination of its past. A consequence of this was perhaps reflected in a poll (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/uk-more-nostalgic-for-empire-than-other-ex-colonial-powers) by a British data analytics firm, YouGov, conducted in March this year. It revealed that a third of Britons believe countries that were colonised by Britain are better off overall for being colonised and an equal number felt that the Empire was something to be proud of. In the light of textbooks failing, the setting up of a museum—an institution widely recognised as a disseminator of cultural histories—seems well placed to take up the mantle. Museums are institutes for informal and lifelong learning and can appeal to different age groups and use images and media to make history exciting.

Although well-intentioned, there are reasons to be at odds with a museum of British colonialism. For instance, there is weight to the argument that self-serving colonial-era statues of merciless oppressors should have no place in the museum of colonialism, even though they are, after all, responsible for preserving the past. The contention is not against any imagery of the coloniser but specific to statues because they are different from ordinary pictures, caricatures and personal accoutrement. Statues employ powerful visual lexicon such as a monumental size, lavish detailing, fine materiality, majestic posturing and three dimensionality that speak the language of exaltation. How would these imposing statues be displayed in a museum and what stories would they tell? Would they be placed on plinths and would visitors still have to look up at them? Would they be placed horizontal or vertical? Would visitors be allowed to touch them or would they now acquire a glorified status as museum objects?

To have controversial homages taken down from their present place only to have an afterlife in a less offensive space of a museum characterises a simultaneous impulse for the removal of uncomfortable pasts as well as the preservation of history. Placed in a museum of colonialism, the monumental statues would occupy an immense physical and epistemological space. On the contrary, many have argued that majestic statues transferred from their place of honour to museums allow for better contextualisation, can inspire an important educational experience and spark civic discussions.

Since these statues are the raison d'être of the museum of British colonialism, they would play a pivotal role in the museum's narrative because they are the objects through which the story of colonialism would be told. The aggrandising visual imagery of former imperial heroes are offset by the museum's text and labels exposing the person's involvement in crimes, violence and slavery. Together, the museum could leave visitors debating whether given the context and time, the person represented by a statue was virtuous or amoral, and if the removal of the statue from its original place was justified or unfair. Yet, the coloniser remains the central actor, with a personal history and a human dimension while the colonised victim is the passive recipient of the anger and violence of colonialism. Even if there is guilt and anger for the violence, there is little opportunity for empathy and understanding of the oppressed.

A second concern is that addressing critical colonial histories cannot be the sole responsibility of a single museum. To do so would be to burden such a museum with the enormous weight of confronting hundreds of years of British colonialism in nearly half the world, all in one lofty space. Moreover, there are plenty of stories of colonialism behind otherwise triumphal statues—of cultural othering, exploitative trade practices, destruction of indigenous industries, violence and slavery—in existing museums and collections in the UK that are still waiting to be told. The question then becomes whether a museum of colonialism can be built in earnest while ignoring the untold colonial legacies that deck the halls of existing museums.

In November this year, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, a Ghanaian film-maker, writer and art historian, participated in a panel discussion on the topic, "Imagining a museum of British colonialism," along with Priyamvada Gopal, a professor of English at Cambridge, Chao Tayiana, a digital-heritage specialist, and Dalrymple. Ayim responded to the idea of a museum of colonialism by emphasising that before constructing a whole new monument to colonialism, the many that already exist require "a kind of unveiling of the skeletons." She added, "The British Museum is a kind of a museum of British colonialism, it's just a little bit misnomered." In fact, most colonial-era museums hold vast collections acquired during the period when Britain had an overseas Empire.

It is a matter of little surprise that most of the majestic colonial-era museums in the UK prospered to a large extent with money channelled through economic oppression of British colonies. The Empire gave these museums collections filled with objects that were stolen, unethically traded, siphoned off and acquired as gifts and purchases under colonial contexts. Yet, despite plentiful research incriminating museums of furthering imperial agenda of British cultural supremacy, most museums continue to perpetuate odd, even offensive narratives. They offer sketchy information on the acquisition and pre-museum life of their objects, stubbornly refuse to diversify their staff along racial and ethnic lines and remain unyielding to long-running claims (https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/feb/18/uk-museums-face-pressure-to-repatriate-foreign-items) for restitution of looted objects in their possessions.

(https://caravanmagazine.in/culture/the-complexities-of-addressing-past-while-decolonising-museums/attachment-16376)

Plaques that form part of the Benin Bronzes displayed at the British Museum in November 2018 in London. The Benin Bronzes are among many high-profile exhibits at the museum that were violently looted from subjugated people by the British Empire. But the museum's director, Hartwig Fischer, has defended the museum's vast collection without acknowledging the colonial plunder. DAN KITWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

The question of decolonisation and restitution has come under increased scrutiny in recent years in Europe and North America. This began in 2017 with the French president, Emmanuel Macron, declaring that returning African artefacts would be "a top priority" for him, during a visit to Burkina Faso. "In the next five years, I want the conditions to be met for the temporary or permanent restitution of African heritage to Africa," he said. Within months, Macron commissioned Felwine Sarr, a Senagalese scholar and artist, and Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian, to investigate the colonial heritage of France and the question of restitution.

In November 2018, Sarr and Savoy published a pathbreaking report (http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf) that recommended the return of sub-Saharan African artefacts in French museums to their countries of origin, if they requested them to be returned. But after severe backlash from museums and public institutions in France, Macron distanced himself from the report's more controversial points of the report. *TIME* reported (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/french-lawmakers-passed-first-step-approving-law-return-looted-artifacts-benin-senegal-1913806) in October this year that French museums have not permanently returned any object since the Sarr-Savoy report, though the following month the French parliament approved a bill to return 27 colonial artefacts to Senegal and Benin within a year.

The Sarr-Savoy report and the Black Lives Matter movement have contributed to a rapid shift in discourse towards decolonisation. This can be discerned from the fact that even Switzerland (https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swiss-take-steps-to--decolonise--cultural-artefacts/46173952), a country that did not have a single colony but nevertheless profited hugely from colonialism, is decolonising its museums. Months after Macron's declaration, in May 2018, Germany published (https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/germany-presents-code-of-conduct-on-handling-colonial-era-artefacts) a code of practice on how to deal with objects acquired under a colonial context. The guidelines explored, among other things, alternatives to definitive restitution such as long-term loans and "joint custody" agreements. The following year, in the wake of the Sarr-Savoy report, the culture ministers from all 16 German states issued a joint declaration (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/germany-declaration-on-restitution-1488250) calling for restitution of human remains, digitisation of collections and supporting provenance research. In 2019, to realise some of these resolves, the German government allocated €1.9 million for provenance research of colonial objects in museums, of which €650,000 were awarded to five research projects in 2020. In the same year, Germany repatriated (https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-saxony-state-collection-repatriates-45-ancestral-remains-to-australia/a-51465215) 45 ancestral remains to indigenous communities of Australia.

The Netherlands was quick to catch up. In January this year, in a gesture unparalleled in Dutch-Indonesian history, the Netherlands returned 1,500 historical objects, valued at a total of €1.1 million, to its former colony, Indonesia. In October, the Dutch government promised (https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/10/dutch-government-to-explore-unconditional-return-of-looted-objects/#:~:text=The%20Dutch%20government%20has%20promised,to%20their%20countries%20of%20orig to develop a comprehensive restitution framework by 2021 as a "key principle" of museum policy. The commitment was based on an official report submitted by a committee constituted by the country's culture ministry. The report recommended "a readiness to return unconditionally" all looted cultural heritage objects and further stated that objects that are not looted but hold "particular cultural, historical or religious importance for source countries" should also be considered for return.

The mounting pressure on museums to respond to racial injustices and white supremacy has prompted UK to act and revise its outdated policy on restitution and repatriation. Museums in the UK have begun to closely re-examine their labels and interpretations in light of their colonial and racist pasts, and remove culturally insensitive objects from display. However, regional and university museums, more than national museums, have been in the forefront of this process of historical redressal. Last November, the Manchester Museum, attached to Manchester University, became the first British institution to return (https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/nov/20/manchester-museum-returns-stolen-sacred-artefacts-to-australians) sacred artefacts to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. On the other hand, this November, Tristram Hunt, the director of London's Victoria and Albert Museum and former member of parliament, admitted (https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=SROrwell+Museum&v=tZm1YZCQsqw) to certain limits in decolonising the institute and repatriating cultural objects given that the museum is embedded within an imperial past. "What we can do," Hunt elaborated, "is be transparent and scholarly about the nature of that history; the provenance of objects; and interpret them as inclusively as possible for as many global audiences possible today."

Overall, the UK government has taken few proactive steps to repatriate colonial-era objects from their collections. This is in part because of the legislature that prohibits deaccessioning cultural objects in national museums and in part to dodge unfounded fears associated with long-term consequence of decolonisation—an empty museum. Even though the conversation has moved a lot forward from the heady stubbornness of a decade ago, national museums in UK have flatly refused to return plundered art objects. In 2008, Ethiopia unsuccessfully lodged a restitution claim for hundreds of objects plundered by the British army in a battle fought at Maqdala, the capital of the Abyssinian Empire, in 1868. In 2019, during a run-up to a Maqdala display, the Victoria and Albert museum offered the objects to Ethiopia on a long-term loan. However, the Ethiopia's ambassador in London, Hailemichael Afework Aberra, rejected the offer. He said, "My government is not interested in loans, it is interested in having those objects returned."

There has also been a strong pushback in the UK towards decolonisation efforts from those who believe that such interventions are profoundly anti-intellectual and tantamount to rewriting history by erasing culture. This includes the right-wing government at the centre. On 22 September, the British culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, wrote a letter to various publicly-funded museums and galleries to underline that spending reviews would take into account actions that do not fall in accordance with the government's position such as removing offensive statues or other artefacts. The letter stated, "As publicly funded bodies, you should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics." Dowden effectively warned the institutions that removing statues or other similar objects could result in them losing the "significant support that you receive from the taxpayer."

Dowden's letter came in the wake of a controversial decision by the British Museum to move the bust of its founding collector, Hans Sloane, from the pedestal to a glass cabinet to create a better context of the conditions in which he created his collection. Sloane's collection, which forms the nucleus of the British museum, was partly financed from the exploitation of African slaves on his wife's sugar plantations. Shortly after Dowden's letter, the British Museum issued a statement to the BBC declaring that it "has no intention of removing controversial objects from public display." Falling in line with Dowden's warning, and almost reproducing the language of his letter, the museum's statement added, "Instead, it will seek where appropriate to contextualise or reinterpret them in a way that enables the public to learn about them in their entirety."

A culture war, real or manufactured (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/15/the-uk-government-is-trying-to-draw-museums-into-a-fake-culture-war), as some have suggested, has led to polarisation over several issues, with places where the past is processed, such as museums, emerging as battlegrounds. Amid the mounting global pressure to decolonise, museums are trying to carefully balance the need for state funding with demands of various audience segments. The Pitt-Rivers museum, an anthropological museum in Oxford, was at the centre of this debate in September for removing (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-54121151) a total of 120 human remains, including a popular collection of *tsantsas*, or shrunken human heads with sewn-up lips and eye sockets. The museum's director, Laura van Broekhoven, argued that the objects reinforced racist stereotypes in the minds of the viewers, and that the decision to remove them was taken after a three-year ethical review of the museum's holdings. The removal is part of the museum's larger process of repatriating ethnographic material, relabelling objects to remove racist language and contextualising them to convey their historical importance. While the museum's attempts to decolonise their collection was applauded, it also received several complaints that the removal of already displaced objects marked a "cultural loss" to the UK.

Similarly, after decades of silence, the British Museum recently changed its labels to accommodate the fact that some objects, such as the high-profile exhibits of Benin bronzes (https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/objects-news/benin-bronzes), were violently looted from subjugated people around the world. But following the spotlight on the museum in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, the director, Hartwig Fischer, defended its vast collection. According to an August report (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/27/british-museum-didnt-loot-artefacts-many-bought-paid/) in *The Telegraph*, Fischer said that it was "a great simplification to simply say that the British Museum is a place of loot and stolen goods." He added, "There is acquisition, there is exchange, there are gifts." What Fischer failed to acknowledge is that unequal colonial relations facilitated unethical purchases at egregious prices or with money earned from slavery, and asymmetrical political power allowed "treasure finds" to be taken out of the origin country.

Without a collective commitment from museums to introspect Britain's colonial past, the easy handling of difficult histories by shipping them off to a single space of a museum of colonialism could have a paradoxical effect of sanitising other cultural spaces. If there is *a* museum of colonialism, then by default other museums are *not* museums of colonialism. There is, therefore, no troubling colonialism *here* because it is all *there*, in the museum of colonialism.

This is not to say that all other museums and cultural institutions will, or should, halt their efforts to decolonise. But what such a museum of colonialism could do is sanction silence to those who lack the moral will to introspect and reinvent themselves. Several museums are grappling with a restless worry that a change in their narrative to accommodate contested colonial histories could transform aesthetic places of inspiration and wonder into distressful places that evoke horror and repulsion. For such museums, feel-good history can then continue unabated as the crimes of colonialism would now be addressed at the new shrine of colonial purgatory. It is important that the burden of decolonisation is shared by all museums, and not borne by any one institute alone.

The decolonisation debate also necessitates the acknowledgment of the vastly different experiences of colonial subjugation across countries and their present day local and cultural context. The process and demands of decolonisation, therefore, cannot be uniform. Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist, has argued in the French daily *Le Monde*, that restitution is "an indisputable principle (https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/11/28/achille-mbembe-la-restitution-des-uvres-est-l-occasion-pour-la-france-de-reparer-et-de-reinventer-sa-relation-avec-l-afrique_5390009_3232.html)" that serves to bring law and justice together. Meanwhile, Kavita Singh, a professor of art history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, has argued against cultural repatriations guided by misplaced outrage at losses of the past. In an article in *Scroll*, Singh wrote (https://scroll.in/article/807507/counterpoint-outrage-over-lost-heritage-could-be-better-directed-at-our-own-institutions) that those concerns cannot take priority over the neglect of cultural treasures in Indian institutions, such as the Amravati sculptures at the Madras Museum, which continues in the present. Instead of retributive justice through repatriations, Singh favours redistributive justice wherein museums function as "lending libraries (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wr-Knplxr5Y)" to share collections between them.

An important question to ask at this point is whether museums can, as we commonly understand them, shoulder the responsibility of telling the story of British colonialism. In the November panel discussion, Gopal suggested that the story of colonialism told through the lens of anti-colonialism cannot be contained within the traditional framework of a brick and motor museum. She pointed to the complicity of museums in furthering Britain's colonial project by producing certain kinds of knowledge about other cultures that "fixed them, essentialised them and rendered them dead."

The process of decolonisation must address not just the collections of a museum, but also the structures and decision-making powers within it, which includes the diversity of its staff. Museums born of nineteenth century Western imperialism remain fundamentally white in their ideology and functioning. According to a 2018-19 Diversity Report (https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ACE_DiversityReport_Final_03032020_0.pdf) by the Arts Council England, a public body funded by the British culture department, only 6 percent of the workforce in major partner museums comprised of black and minority ethnic, or BAME, staff.

Similarly, people of colour and ethnic minorities form a small proportion of individuals who visit museums—an act strongly associated with class and race. A 2018 museum audience report (http://www.theaudienceagency.org/asset/1995) by The Audience Agency—a national, non-profit consultancy—found that more than 80 percent of the visitors were consistently white across age groups. Most museums in the UK are scripting the terms and conditions of decolonisation either without consulting BAME voices or including them only as peripheral responses to their dominant narrative. In a report (https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/art-design/2019/07/can-we-decolonise-british-museum) on decolonising the British Museum, Shaheen Kasmani, a Birmingham-based artist and curator, spoke of her experience of walking through a museum building. “As a visible Muslim woman, I’m often looked at like I’m the exhibit,” she said.

It is evident that the project to decolonise museums raises several questions about the underlying complexities in the task. The solution is not to discard the idea of a museum of colonialism altogether as redeemable institutions, but to imagine a different kind of a museum that demolishes the imperial museum model.

A noteworthy example of such a model is the Museum of British Colonialism (https://www.museumofbritishcolonialism.org/), established in 2018 with a focus on the colonial history of the UK and Kenya, primarily the Mau Mau insurgency from 1952–60. Staffed with a racially, ethnically and professionally diverse group of volunteers, the MBC is not a brick and mortar museum. Instead, it holds temporary exhibitions both in Kenya and UK. It actively works with the local community, historians and storytellers in Kenya to collect oral histories and colonial documentation. It believes that the history of colonialism is not entirely Britain’s to tell, it belongs to the colonies. As museums and scholars around the globe varyingly interpret and debate decolonisation, there has been scant conversation around it in India. What does confronting colonialism mean for the museums in India? Is the ghost of the colonial past only for British museums to exorcise? Are museums in India, by the virtue of being in a post-colonial society, free of colonialism?

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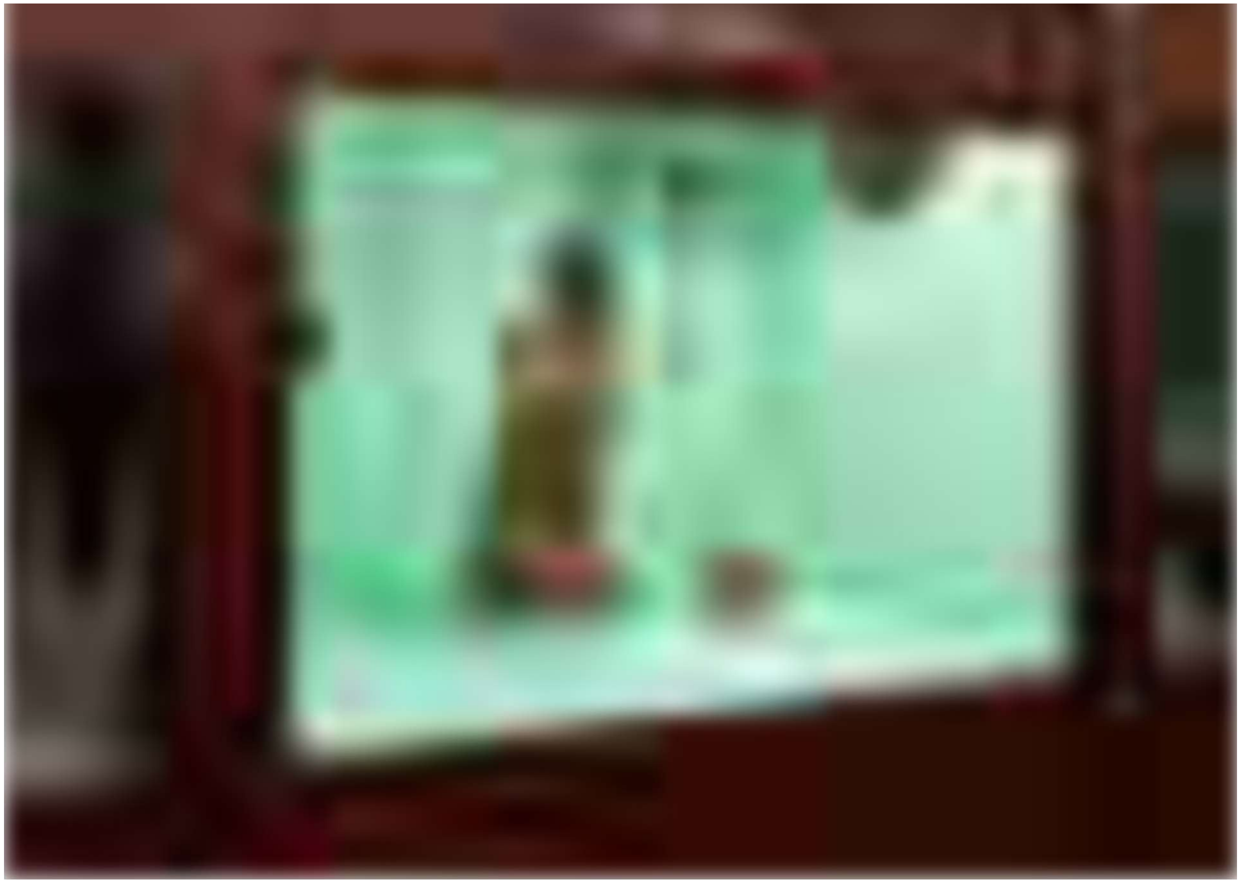

A representation of a woman from Odisha's Gadaba tribe at the Government Museum in Chennai. India's colonial mindset can be seen in its interaction with tribal culture, symbolically preserving it in glass cases for the clinical observation of largely non-tribal visitors, while encroaching upon tribal habitations and land rights. COURTESY WHY VISIT LONDON PROJECT

With the formal transfer of power from the colonial to Indian state, India began to fully exercise its sovereignty over its spiritual, culture and institutional life. One way in which this was done was in the writing of postcolonial histories and its negotiation in public spaces and cultural institutions such as museums and galleries. Such a gesture announced the arrival of India—a country with its unique and glorious history—on a world stage, and helped to create an underlying sense of "Indianness." However, despite anti-colonial gestures in the form of name changes, removal of colonial-era statues from Indian streets and establishment of national monuments and cultural institutions, India remains deeply colonial in its mindset. Such a colonial mindset can be read in the taxonomy, narrative and functioning of museums in India till date.

For example, tribal and folk art is even today seen as "ethnographical" and placed outside the canon of Indian art, while objects from the ancient, canonised religious traditions of India such as Hinduism and Buddhism tell the story of Indian art. They are neither classified as fine nor decorative arts and placed at the bottom of a fictive linear evolution of material culture and technology. Such a classification is a replication of a colonial taxonomy that saw Europe as the producer of art while all Indian paintings and sculptures were regarded as "primitive" and "monstrous," and considered to serve only documentary purposes. Independent India adopted this colonial politics when it came to the country's tribal population, symbolically preserving their culture in glass cases for the clinical observation of largely non-tribal visitors, while encroaching upon their habitations and land rights.

Yet another legacy of colonialism is the shame of the erotic and a reluctant acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in Indian art and art history that is manifested across museums and exhibitions. As the gaze of Victorian prudishness and false morality interpreted female nudity, cross dressing, sexual imagery in Indian art as morally corrupt and obscene, it necessitated its reappraisal to redeem it from such attacks. The erotic in Indian art was assigned a deeper symbolic and metaphysical meaning that stood in opposition to the corporeality of the West. The more art was seen through the prism of spirituality, the harder it became to talk about the physical desire, sexuality and sensuousness.

Perhaps the most insidious way in which colonial mindset can be seen at work in Indian museums is the apathy it appears to hold for its visitors, many of whom come from working-class backgrounds. Visitors are rarely onboarded to improve the museum's accessibility, enjoyability and educational value. This is not too different from the museum in the colony. Indian visitors were spoken about, often derisively and as a problem, but never directly spoken to. Even today, most Indian museums lack visitor information—details, for instance, about how many and who visited—show little care for the visitor's interest, and rarely ask for their feedback. There are few exhibitions that give voice to local communities and ordinary people to tell their personal histories of everyday life. The museum visitor appears to be treated as a figure who can only be educated, but not as someone who could have something to offer to the museum and its repository of knowledge.

A few museums are trying to break away from the colonial mode of functioning in India. Ahmedabad's Conflictorium—a museum located in the 90-year-old refurbished Gool Lodge, the former home and hair salon of a Parsi woman—looks at people's memory and experience of violence. Or the pop-up exhibition in 2015, *Hum Sab Nizamuddin*, which documented voices of ordinary people to tell the history of the neighbourhood through photos, documents and videos.

What this demonstrates is that without cleansing the colonial mind, even museums established to topple colonial histories can function in the most colonial way. A postcolonial museum of colonialism cannot be limited to retrieving the oppressive past and bringing it to the awareness of the present. It must commit itself to examining, questioning and combating those very processes that have historically enabled the white person's entitlement, exploitation of physical and emotional labour of people of colour, and biased cultural interpretations. Anti-colonial text cannot be an appendage to a colonial narrative that otherwise runs wild in the museums. Whatever the format and model of the hypothetical museum of colonialism, it can only be viewed as the start of a larger process of challenging the legacy of the British Empire and not as the final solution.

(https://caravanmagazine.in/culture/the-complexities-of-addressing-past-while-decolonising-museums/attachment-16378)

The Ambedkarite Shahirs was an exhibition at Ahmedabad's Conflictorium, a museum that looks at people's memories of conflict and violence. The exhibition intended to see and understand the Dalit Movement through its songs; trace the trajectories of Ambedkari shahiri, or poetry, how Ambedkar had become its protagonist, and how these songs have consolidated the spirit and vision of a casteless society. It was held in early 2019, curated by Yogesh Maitryea and co-curated by V Divakar. COURTESY CONFLICTORIUM - MUSEUM OF CONFLICT

Confronting colonialism cannot be through museums alone, it requires decolonising history and decolonising the mind. Germany’s success in facing its crimes through its comprehensive state programme of denazification has lessons in store for decolonisation. In Germany, the memory of Nazi violence is inscribed in the making of its modern public spaces and not circumscribed by museums or documentation centres of Nazi history. German towns and cities are dotted with memorials to the victims of Nazi crimes and those who resisted the National Socialists. So many are these memorials build to honour the victims, and so intense is the whole process, that one cannot walk too far on any street or visit a museum in Germany without being reminded of the country's vile Nazi past.

Indeed, confronting colonialism is an incredibly complex subject that demands combing through weighty emotions of shame, pride, guilt, selective amnesia, anger and humiliation. It is a process without a template for easy resolutions. But with courage and commitment, we can imagine different kinds of museums and memorials of British colonialism which will do justice to the former colonies of the world's once largest Empire.

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